

Name: _____ Date: _____ Period: _____

John Steptoe, Author And Illustrator



I am the rule. By that I mean there are a great many others like me where I came from.

In the 1960s, children's books lacked diversity. They didn't have Black, Asian, or Native American characters. John Steptoe wanted to change this. He wanted to create books for Black children that reflected their lives. Javaka Steptoe, John's son, said, "My father told me that the reason he created children's books was that when he was growing up, there were no people in books that looked like him, that spoke like him, that were doing the things that he was doing, or were doing the things the people in his community were doing. There was no humanity for Black people in children's books."¹

John Steptoe was born on September 14, 1950 in Brooklyn, New York. As a child, many people thought that John was strange. Unlike most boys his age, he did not want to run and play outside. Instead, he preferred to stay at home and draw. His parents supported his desire to create art. When it was time for John to go to high school, they sent him to The High School of Art and Design. Later he would also attend the Vermont Academy.

When John was just 16 year old, he wrote and illustrated a book called *Stevie*. This book was about a boy named Robert whose mother takes care of her friend's son, Stevie. At first Robert did not like having Stevie around, but when Stevie and his family move away, Robert realizes how much he is going to miss him. John sent his book to publishers and in 1969, when John was just 19 years old, it was published.

John continued to write and illustrate books. At the beginning of his career his books were based on his experiences as a child. His books were realistic fiction. Later, he turned to fantasy. He wanted his

readers to dream and use their imaginations. These fantasy books still reflected diversity. *The Story Of Jumping Mouse* was based on a Native American Legend and *Mufuro's Beautiful Daughters* was an African Cinderella story.

John Steptoe wrote and illustrated ten books. He also illustrated six books for other authors. He won several awards for his illustrations, including the Caldecott Honor Award and The Coretta Scott King Award For Illustration.

Steptoe was a single dad to a son, Javaka, and a daughter, Bwella. His experiences with his children inspired some of his books. He also used his children as models when he created illustrations for his books.

John Steptoe died on August 28, 1989 when he was only 38 years old. Even though his life was short, he made a positive impact on the world. He was one of the first people who wrote and illustrated books for Black children. This inspired others to do the same, including his own son, Javaka, who is also an author and illustrator for children.

In 1995, the American Library Association created an award to honor John Steptoe. It is called the John Steptoe New Talent Award. It is awarded yearly to an author and an illustrator who just started their careers.

¹ Tallie, Mariahadessa Ekere. "Javaka Steptoe: Interview", *Mosaic Magazine*, April 12, 2017. Retrieved from <https://mosaicmagazine.org/javaka-steptoe-interview/#.XvvrTChKhpw> on 6.30.2020.

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1. Why do you think that children's books lacked diversity in the 1960s?

2. The author writes, "As a child, many people thought that John was strange." How do you know that John's parents did not think he was strange? Use text evidence to support your answer.

3. How was John Steptoe recognized for his contribution to children's literature?

4. What detail from the passage supports the statement below?
John Steptoe was a hard worker.
